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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how the Oakland University Early Childhood Project developed a technique for community participation in a university program. Using a federal planning grant, a committee of community and professional members representing a variety of economic backgrounds and ethnic groups was formed. The interaction of the professional and community members in planning the program and in selecting the practicum site and the program participants is credited with improving the university's ability to deliver a service to the community, improving numerous aspects of the training program, and developing an alliance between one segment of the university community and the constituency the university serves. (Author/MLF)

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THE ROLE OF A COMMUNITY COMMITTEE IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION

In discussing problems confronting higher education today and postulating solutions for them, educators appear wont to define "community" as groups of persons within its own confines. Topics concerning governance and policy or even rebellion and destruction involve three groups, governing boards including administrators, faculty and students. If the "community" is considered, attention is usually directed toward alumni of the system. This is not to say that social issues do not occupy much of the commitment of time, energy and resources of higher education. Indeed, the case is quite the contrary. The University has rediscovered the community and is willing to turn outward to assist the community in solving its problems. However, almost universally the problem solving involves the university becoming involved in community affairs, and rarely, if ever, involving the community in university affairs.

Those involved in higher education whose collective social consciences have been piqued by claims that they were practicing an undemocratic double-talk when professing democracy but demonstrating an elitist attitude, have usually assuaged that pique in one of two ways. The first involves allowing a more diverse clientele into the institution. This, of course, has precipitated a host or problems for everyone concerned, but one can turn to statistics or quotas and, in general, feel good about being "with it."

The second form of assistance employed by the university is for it to turn its rather awesome resources to the "community needs." Such endeavors usually take the forms of telling the community what its problem is; applying the university's panacea to the problem; and reporting to the community what has been done

for it. A bewildered community may be left with a voluminous report of what happened written in a style unintelligible to anyone but those who are a product of the university.

In neither of the described situations should the involvement be construed as being totally negative. Accommodating to a forgotten segment of the community is a positive turn. Providing educational opportunities for this group is what an academic institution is best geared to do. If economic opportunity appears to be a prime motivator for many disadvantaged youngsters to attend colleges and universities, so be it. A hungry person cannot afford the luxury of trading earning for learning. Equality of opportunity must be a consideration that takes precedence over the preservation of an elitist institution. Certainly university involvement in community affairs must continue. The university has expertise in many fields which can be focused on community problems. The university is well-equipped to assist the community. The problem appears to be one of getting university personnel to accept the notion that the gates of Janus open both ways. Obviously, university people can go into the community and make a contribution. It appears just as obvious that the community could go into the university and make as significant a contribution.

OPENING THE GATES

Max Lerner was once asked to summarize in a single word the essence of American civilization. This scholar who had written thousands of pages about America, its promise, its potential and its institutions, pondered and then answered, "access." He explained that the Declaration of Independence states that all men are born free and equal. He hopes the promise of freedom is universally accepted. However, it is not axiomatic that people are born equal. Lerner states that every child born to the same parentage is born with unequal

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abilities and potentiality. However, in America the belief prevails that every child should have equal access to equal life chances. This would mean that every unequally born child has the opportunity to develop his unequal ability to the fullest. This access, Lerner describes as the heart of the American experience.

How well the access route to higher education has been opened in the past few years is debatable. However, even the most pessimistic observer would grant that inroads have been made. But, access by whom? To participate how? The gate is opening to students who represent some of the ugly unequal realities of American life; poverty, opportunity and power which are among the most blatant abuses. However, access into the higher education system has been on the institution's terms, hardly on the students'.

Berkeley, Columbia, Kent State are examples of institutions that have shared the brunt of the lack of communion between institution and its immediate constituency. Most institutions of higher education have accommodated to this void in some way. The immediate constituency, the students, has been granted a voice in governance. However, a less immediate constituency is still being denied access to the university. Those citizens for and to whom so much is being done, have little or no input into whether something should be done, how it should be done, and granting these, how well it was done. From Head Start through Higher Education, there has been noticeable little citizen input into university program planning, operation, and evaluation by ordinary community residents. The following account describes how the Oakland University Early Childhood Project, for better or worse, and certainly richer for the experience, developed a technique for community participation in a university program through the use of a Community Committee.

A BEGINNING

In 1969 Professor Paul Olson, Director of the Tri-University Project at the University of Nebraska, invited representatives from a number of universities to discuss the feasibility of developing a consortium of universities interested in the field of early childhood education. It was his belief that most university administrators and faculties failed to establish significant relationships between themselves and the community. As a result, the training programs which they directed, apparently for the ultimate benefit of the community, were developed without reference to that community's perception of what it needed or wanted. One of the interesting things about the conference was that representatives of minority groups, the poor, and the powerless average community citizen, were present. A great deal of heat and some light was generated as a result of interaction which took place at that meeting between representatives of these two very diverse groups. At that meeting two things were accomplished: First, some university types were convinced that any early childhood training projects that developed without direct input from the community would be morally questionable and perhaps academically inappropriate. Second, the groundwork was laid for a consortium of universities to work together toward the common goals of (1) developing diverse but sound early childhood training models, (2) finding ways to share our common experiences, problems and successes, and (3) developing within our projects diverse ways of working effectively with the "target" communities.

Consequently, under the mild prodding of the United States Office of Education and the stimulus provided by the Nebraska Confederation (as the consortium was known) certain recipients of EPDA Early Childhood Education grants made a serious attempt to establish community advisory committees.

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THE OAKLAND EXPERIENCE

In 1970 Oakland University received a planning grant from the U.S. Office of Education. This grant made possible a decided advantage in maximizing the use of the community committee. There was lead time to decide what the objectives were in relation to the community committee, the roles the committee might serve in the formulation of an early childhood project, and adequate time to plan for their involvement beginning with the initial stages of the project.

It was probably fortunate that there were no specific guidelines concerning the composition and duties of the community advisory boards. With no guidelines and no known prototypes, the staff was forced to think and talk together about its perceptions of the committee and the roles the committee was to serve. As university personnel each staff member had experienced the frustration of participating in committees which he felt were merely 'window dressing" for decision making, and, as such, rejected a committee of this type. Conversely, there was apprehension in the realization that a committee which really had decision-making power might take the project in directions different from those representing the staff's conceptualization of an idealized program.

Since a major objective of the project was to have a committee which had a meaningful and active role in all phases of the project, the staff was willing to risk the conflicts and compromises that would inevitably arise. It was believed that the committee members would have valuable insights and suggestions which would strengthen and broaden the total program. This faith in the quality of input from the community representatives has been rewarded in scores of situations. However, it would be less than true to say that the decision was arrived at without any apprehensions.

Another task which was left for the advisory committee was that of determining the size and make-up of the committee, itself. A decision was made to pay

the community members for their participation on the committee. This was an important point because it was envisioned that the members of the committee would represent the economically deprived in the most literal sense of the term. Therefore, it was felt that it would be grossly unfair to ask these people to contribute a substantial portion of their time and energy without receiving some nominal compensation.

The committee began formally in July, 1970, when representatives of six agencies and organizations who were working in the Wayne-Oakland County areas were called together for a discussion of program concerns. These persons included representatives from Head Start agencies, social service agencies, a parent-child center, and several school systems. This initial meeting included only professional educators, but those whose contacts extended into the true community. A major question to that group whose members were recruited to formulate a professional advisory committee, was whether to have two separate committees, one representing the grass-roots community expected to be served, and themselves. The professionals suggested a joint meeting with a group of community persons which would be identified by having each professional contact one or two community persons in their areas. A meeting was held with both constituencies. Discussion resulted in the formulation of the nucleus of a united committee, with both professional and non-professional members.

The first regular meeting was set up for early September to discuss membership, roles, and programatic directions. In October the committee elected co-chairmen - one a professional and one a non-professional member who led the group in its formative years. Members suggested other community persons to round out the size of the group to fourteen persons. Both chair persons represented minority groups and different geographic locales. However, each was elected

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on the basis of what she and he were bringing to the committee in knowledge and leadership capacities. The original committee members' subsequent suggestions enabled the program to be broadened to include members from six different communities in the greater Detroit Metropolitan area. The new representation involved an even wider range of interests, abilities and concerns. Present committee membership consists of fourteen community members and nine professional members - all are full voting members. The committee represents a variety of economic backgrounds. Racially it includes blacks, Mexican-American and whites.

Several tasks were immediate for the committee which helped it in the formulation of the roles it was to have in the Early Childhood Project. The most critical task was the approval of a proposal to be forwarded to the U.S. Office of Education for the operational phase. Approval was sought for two reasons. First, the pressure of time ruled out a proposal written entirely by the committee or a subcommittee of it. Secondly, the committee thought that the staff members should exercise leadership in the proposal writing. In order for the committee to maximize its role in the design of the operating proposal which was to be sent to the U.S. Office of Education in November, the committee divided into three subcommittees: Budget and Evaluation, Curriculum and Practicum, and Participant Selection. Meeting weekly during October, the groups studied and revised the tentative proposal, and presented their questions and recommendations to the total committee. The proposal in all its facets, the curriculum and practicum, the budget and the staff were reviewed by and revised by the committee and final approval for it was voted on November 18, 1970.

When this phase of work was completed the group became involved in the selection of practicum sites and in the selection of program participants. These two tasks were of major concern until May, 1971. Ten practicum sites were

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chosen. A practicum leader was selected from each site. This teacher would participate as a part-time Masters candidate in the program and also work with the full-time students in the practicum settings.

Community committee members proved to be a valuable resource in identifying and evaluating the practicum leaders and sites. Their suggestions as to possible sites were investigated since they were aware of good teachers in their home settings. When all possible practicum sites had been given initial screening by the staff's practicum director, a Practicum Committee, composed of both staff and community members, visited each site under consideration and talked with potential practicum leaders, principals, and in some cases school board members about the program and suitability of it for the children and teachers in the sites.

Several evaluation instruments designed by the practicum director were used as an aid for observing, interviewing, and discussing the possible sites and candidates. The committee then met and ranked the candidates. In almost every case the choices were unanimous.

Committee members from each geographic area represented in the project were, for obvious reasons, most interested in the choices from their neighborhoods and were most active in the selection of those candidates in their home areas. Their insights and concerns often opened new dimensions in the consideration of a candidate. Their interest in securing sites which were most beneficial to the young children of their community was very evident. Although the major work of selection has been completed, the Practicum Committee has continued to be actively involved.

For each year the project has been in operation, members of the community committee have been actively engaged in the selection of fellows to participate in

the program. Applications for the fellowships were tendered to qualified persons known to committee members. Since applications were received nationwide, literally hundreds of transcripts, letters of recommendation, vitae, and application forms had to be screened. A system for rating the candidates was devised for candidate screening and final selections were made on the basis of committee and staff evaluations. Committee members spent many hours at varying times at the university screening applications, often at considerable inconvenience to themselves and their families. It was interesting to note that community committee members endorsed the best candidates. They were not at all parochial in their selections.

For the second year of the program, the previous year's fellows assisted the community committee and the staff in selecting fellows.

Having chosen fellows for the program, the committee felt a closeness to and a responsibility for them. The committee kept in contact with the fellows in practicum setting by inviting the fellows to their meetings and through informal gatherings.

As the curriculum developed the committee was kept informed. They gave valuable input. Once this phase of the program became finalized, the community committee took an active part in determining its final form. Since all phases of the curriculum were discussed with the committee at various times during the year, the committee was well aware of the program plans as well as the problems that were encountered. Their input continues to influence the modification of the curriculum to mirror their concerns.

As the project continued, the committee has continued to be involved in its progress and problems, in meeting with and working with the participants, in on-going evaluation of project achievement, and in shaping the proposal for subsequent years.

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Although Oakland's experiences with the community advisory committee has been very worthwhile and aid to the project has been invaluable, meetings were not without conflicts, nor was there any evidence of a committee composed of "yes men." In fact, the very first problem encountered centered on the issue of rubber stamping. Staff members found themselves viewed with considerable suspicion and some testing of sincerity when they first discussed their desire to set up the committee and described the committee function. In fact, most committee members (both professional and community) initially reacted with disbelief. The professionals were hesitant to ask persons to serve, "if they would just be rubber stamps." The community people hesitated to waste valuable time on a committee, "that wouldn't really decide anything." Many had already had experiences which were of this nature on other committees on which they had served. Even after they were assured that this committee would be different at the first few meetings a wariness was very apparent. The committee was launched but the "testing period" was very evident.

The storm broke when the separate committees began considering the proposal, especially concerning the budget and staff. Many hours were spent arguing, explaining, and finally compromising and coming to a resolution regarding budget questions. One of the most significant contributions of the committee was a suggestion which resulted in finding a way to train about 60% more fellows within the initial budget limitations, thus reducing cost-per-fellow trained by a very substantial amount. This savings was brought about when committee members queried the staff about the necessity of keeping the number of fellows to ten, that number for who stipends would be available. When it was learned that class size was not a prime factor, but that additional fellows could receive no stipend, the committee voted to recruit an additional six members who would attend the program, receive its benefits, and become qualified and certified to teach

disadvantaged youngsters. Committee members contacted Oakland University officials who granted fellowships to the six new participants so that they might attend at no cost to themselves. Six excellent candidates who otherwise would not have been able to do so, participated in the program each year.

When it became apparent to the committee that the staff really would change and compromise, they at last seemed to accept statements concerning their role as a decision-making body, and consequently have taken hold of this role actively and have evidenced great concern, innovative ideas and enthusiastic suggestions.

Another problem which arises with a community committee is the amount of time which must be spent with them in explaining one's goals, methods, and reasons for planning and working in certain ways. The constraints of the university often appeared unreasonable or unnecessary. However, the situation forced staff members to think clearly about their plans and to defend or adapt them in the face of searching questions and differing viewpoints. It has been necessary throughout the project's duration to communicate with all members of the unit as each new issue arose. This, of course, presents a much more time-consuming process than "executive decisions." On the other hand, the project staff has felt that community lay persons had little difficulty in understanding their explanations of the program that was envisioned, the goals for good teacher education, and the various problems that need to be solved. Conversely, they have often gone to the heart of a particular problem with unerring aim and were extremely knowledgeable concerning education, within the perspective of their own particular experiences.

In the selection of practicum sites, there were many possible problem situations. Just the effort of coordinating staff and committee members

schedules to arrange site visitations was often a difficult job and, consequently, the selection was not accomplished as early as scheduled. Also, there were some differences of opinions which had to be resolved. On the whole, however, the time spent earlier with the committee in clarifying goals and the methods used to facilitate observation of specific areas of the programs paid off in the meeting of minds which was evident in final selections. It was necessary in some communities to change the focus of the type of sites that were sought, depending on what the committee members perceived as the most essential types of sites. In the long run, since these sites will probably be most meaningful to the total community, adjustments were made. The sincere concern of the committee toward the education of children in their own community made them dependable and dedicated evaluators.

Parents and other community people have something to offer educators of young children; especially poor parents--parents of the ghetto. This is not news to many educators, of course. What is news is to consider the community a co-equal partner in decisions that have traditionally been regarded as the exclusive turf of educators--to give the community representatives decision-making responsibility in curriculum building, budget making, staff and participant selection, and other areas jealously guarded as the sole prerogative of professionals.

Educators cannot elect to share decision-making power simply out of altruistic motives, or because they wish to provide opportunities for community self-actualization, or because such sharing encourages the university and the community to practice democratic processes together, or because it helps to develop community pride. All these are powerful reasons, indeed. However, they should share their decision-making responsibility for both idealistic and practical reasons. The idealistic reason for sharing decision-making responsibility is

is because it is morally right to do so. Parents should have a strong voice in determining matters which affect their children's lives as intimately as education does. The practical reason for sharing decision-making responsibility is because educators need parental support. Citizens can provide that indispensable layman's insight which may be hidden from those who constantly deal with children from a professional bias. Oakland's experience readily attests to the quality of contributions from community persons. When working with a community group, Oakland's staff found themselves forced to defend and explain their programs and practices. The very process of defending and explaining keeps them on their toes. Not occasionally they would find themselves unable to defend or explain a worn-out or inappropriate article of faith about teaching young children. This is particularly so when the target population involves children from a minority culture which may be foreign to their personal experience. In this case direct and significant input from the community is not only appropriate; it is indispensable.

Oakland's experience suggests that trust in the community is not misplaced. Progress will not be entirely smooth and one's work will be enormously complicated by bringing community representatives into the process. However, weighing contributions versus problems the Oakland experience has proved to be extremely valuable for the staff, the academic program, the academic community and the community at large. In the process, one small step has been taken to re-establish that trust and mutual respect that is sorely needed between the university and the community it desired to serve.

CONCLUSION

In concluding this description of Oakland University's experience with the community committee concept, as exemplified in Oakland's Early Childhood Project, it seems that there are three very obvious benefits which accrued to Oakland

University, the Early Childhood Project Staff and the Community Committee, itself.

First, it is clear that having an effective Community Committee resulted in an improvement of our ability to deliver a service to the community. The service we initially intended to deliver was to train experienced and prospective teachers to work effectively with young children. Through data which we have collected, interviews with graduates of our program, and evaluations by an outside panel there is evidence this goal has been achieved.

Our understanding of the children and adults in the community was greatly enhanced through direct contact with the members of the community committee and through them our understanding of the problems, aspirations and needs of the community which Oakland University serves. Graduates of Oakland's program are now working effectively in and with the community. Many of them are working effectively with community committees of their own. If Oakland's project had not provided the model it is probable that some of these committees would not now exist and it is certain that our graduates would not have had the benefit of prior experience in working with such committees.

Second, the input of the community committee resulted in the improvement of numerous aspects of the Oakland training program. In the first place, many of the training experiences which were provided were originally suggested or modified by members of the Community Committee. In the second place, members of the Community Committee participated jointly with the fellows in certain parts of the training program. This arrangement proved beneficial to both the fellows and members of the committee. Finally, the model of a community committee which the overall project provided was duplicated by the project fellows in their Spring Practicum sites where the fellows were required to plan, operate, and evaluate their own early childhood program. Each of these practicum sites had its own community

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committee. These "mini-community committees" were usually modeled after the "parent" community committees. This resulted in the fellows having the direct experience of organizing and working with a community committee as part of their training program at Oakland.

Third, it is evident that the Oakland experiment resulted in the development of an alliance between one segment of the university community and the constituency which Oakland serves. If this alliance could be duplicated by a significant number of the sub-units within Oakland University it could be said that Oakland University is getting into vital touch with the community. Recent events at Oakland indicate that this is happening within the School of Education. The model which was pioneered by the Early Childhood Project was utilized by the Urban Corps, a Teacher Corps Project. More recently two other organized units within the School of Education have developed successful community committees. There is reason to believe that the original impetus of the Early Childhood Community Committee was a significant influence in prodding our colleagues into following our example. Oakland University's School of Education in the past two years has made significant strides in the direction of opening the gates of Janus both ways. There seems to be substantial evidence that the Early Childhood Project was influential in initiating this movement which has proved to be a very fruitful one for Oakland University.